Ideal L2 self and sensitization in L2 learning motivation: A case study of two Korean ESL students

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Kim, Tae-Young. 2010. Ideal L2 self and sensitization in L2 learning motivation: A case study of two Korean ESL students. Korean Journal of English Language and Linguistics 10-2, 321-351. By analyzing two Korean ESL students in Toronto, this paper develops Dörnyei’s (2005, 2009) notion of the ideal L2 self and specifies the conditions of maintaining higher levels of the ideal L2 self from the perspective of Vygotskian sociocultural theory (SCT). In particular, learners’ subjective recognition of the gap between their current L2 proficiency and desired proficiency is conceptualized as sensitization. By connecting sensitization to SCT, the researcher investigates the complexities of learners’ life conditions and their role in maintaining the ideal L2 self by using monthly semi-structured interviews. The data were transcribed and analyzed through the use of the grounded theoretic approach. The results show empirical evidence that mere exposure to the target language community per se may not guarantee a higher level of L2 learning motivation and that even those who initially have an externally-oriented ought-to L2 self can exhibit an ideal L2 self when their learning goals and participation in L2 communities become interlinked. Sensitization and the creation of affordances capture the moment of the transformation from the ought-to L2 self to the ideal L2 self. (183 words)

Key Words: ESL Motivation, Ideal L2 Self, Sensitization, Sociocultural Theory, Interview Method, Motive, Goal, Affordances

1. Introduction

Compared with other sub-fields of applied linguistics, L2
motivation research has been crucially influenced by quantitative paradigms. For example, socio-educational model (Gardner, 1985, 2009), self-determination theory (SDT) (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2000), willingness to communicate (WTC) (MacIntyre, 2007), and process model (Dornyei, 2001; Dornyei & Ottó, 1998) have been variously adopted in the area of L2 motivation and have focused on identifying general trends of L2 learning motivation. As a result, we now have insight that understanding L2 learning motivation requires a close collaboration of cognitive, social, and contextual dimensions.

However, despite such academic advances in the area, individual L2 learners' unique motivational paths, when they are exposed to study abroad (SA) contexts, are still rarely reported in the field of L2 learning motivation, and only a few exist in academia (e.g., Allen, 2010; Allen & Herron, 2003; Allen & Kim, 2010; DuFon & Churchill, 2006; Kim, 2007, 2009a). In this regard, we need to focus on particular cases and delve into the interplay between each L2 learner and his or her L2 learning SA contexts.

Given this backdrop, this paper attempts to investigate the cases of two Korean ESL students' L2 learning motivation by adopting the perspective of longitudinal qualitative research. Developing Dornyei's (2005, 2009) ideal and ought-to L2 selves and Kim's (2009a) sociocultural theoretic L2 motivation theory, the learners' ideal L2 selves and their impact on their L2 learning activities will be explored. In addition, the notion of sensitization or "the moment when an L2 learner recognizes a subjective gap between his or her L2 proficiency and the desirable L2 proficiency" (Kim, 2007, p. 109) is elaborated. The conditions of arousing sensitization, the maintenance of it, and its impact on the students' L2 motivation is discussed with close reference to van Lier's (2000) affordances.

### 2. Review of Literature

The rapid development of information technology (IT) and high speed Internet have drastically increased the need for communication among people who speak different languages. This means that without being physically present in a foreign country, we can still communicate with speakers of other languages in English as an international language. Given this situation, it is not difficult to assume that L2 learners may not wish to be integrated into or to be physically exposed to an L2 speech community while still wanting to learn an L2. Moreover, if measured by L2 motivation questionnaires, the same token of instrumentality (Gardner, 1985) such as the desire to learn an L2 for the purpose of employment or university entrance may be highly differentiated if we take a close look at the level of internalization of the need to learn the L2. For some learners, their L2 learning motivation is closely related to their future aspirations (e.g., getting a dream job) and their desire to enhance their sense of well-being; for others, it may be externally imposed by their family, by their colleagues, or by social pressure (Taguchi, Magid, & Papi, 2009).

For this reason, expanding Higgins's (1987) possible self theory, Dörnyei (2005, 2009) proposed the concept of ideal L2 self and ought-to L2 self in the L2 motivational self-system. Dörnyei underscored that the former represents positive consequences of one's desire for L2 learning, whereas the latter is less internalized and socially mandated, originating from learners' recognition of potentially negative, debilitating consequences in the future (e.g., being unemployed, failing to enter a university, or obtaining a low English test score). Dörnyei and Ushioda (2009, pp. 3-4) explained the ideal L2 self as "the representation of the attributes that someone would ideally like to possess (i.e., a representation of personal hopes,
aspirations, or wishes)" and the ought-to L2 self as "the attributes that one believes one ought to possess (i.e., a representation of someone else’s sense of duty, obligations, or responsibilities)." Dörnyei (2009, p. 29) highlighted that "traditional integrative and internalized instrumental motives" typically belong to an ideal L2 self, and an ought-to L2 self is "more extrinsic (i.e., less internalised) types of instrumental motives."

The uniqueness of Dörnyei's (2005, 2009) L2 motivational self-system is the interchangeability between the ideal L2 self and the ought-to L2 self. An L2 learner's ought-to self mainly initiated by the learner's sense of duty or obligation can be transformed into an ideal L2 self if the learner fully understands the necessity of learning the L2 and relates the meaning of L2 learning to his or her personal life in future (Kim, 2009b). Conversely, even if a learner has an ideal L2 self, his or her life circumstances can sometimes function as debilitative factors. For example, if a Korean learner of English is constantly surrounded by a group of Korean students using Korean for daily communication, even though they may be in the target language community, the social context may hinder the learner's realization of the importance of learning and using English as a second language (ESL); thus, the learner may no longer consider English as being important to his or her future. In such a case, the learner's ideal L2 self is degenerated into an ought-to L2 self, where only externally mandated needs to learn ESL exist. Although Dörnyei (2005) stated that L2 learning experience has a causal role in determining an ideal and ought-to L2 selves, this dynamic interchangeability between the two L2 selves in L2 learning motivation has not been sufficiently highlighted.

Another new proposal is found in Kim's (2007, 2009a, 2009b) L2 motivation model. Kim's model is influenced by activity theory (AT) (Engeström, 1999; Leont'ev, 1978), which was developed under the aegis of Vygotskian sociocultural theory (SCT) (Vygotsky, 1978, 1987). Kozulin (2002), Lantolf and Appel (1994), Lantolf and Thorne (2006), and Ushioda (2003, 2007) emphasized that mediation, or the way each individual establishes meaningful relationships to the perceived world using physical and psychological tools, is given priority in SCT. Depending on the nature of mediation between learners (as active agents) and their learning environment (or affordance, van Lier, 2000), the learners' L2 learning motivation and L2 proficiency become idiosyncratic, not easily predictable in advance. Lantolf and Genung (2002) incorporated SCT into L2 motivation and argued that L2 learners' motive is mediated by L2 communities of practice; if any tension is identified in the mediational process, the learners, as active agents, would constantly try to negotiate learning activities and would endeavor to attach personal meanings to the learning process. Despite Lantolf and Genung’s introduction of SCT to L2 motivation research, they concentrated mostly on the retrospective account of the L2 learner, and thus, longitudinal changes in L2 learning motivation need to be investigated by using a more robust explanatory framework.

Presenting the relationship between the L2 motivational self-system and SCT-based L2 motivation theory, Kim (2009b) argued that the less-internalized ought-to L2 self is similar to L2 motives and that the more internalized ideal L2 self, to L2 motivation. Figure 1 below shows that the transformation from an ought-to L2 self and L2 motives to an ideal L2 self and L2 motivation involves how the learner concretizes specific goals and how persistently the learner pursues those goals. In addition, the existence of facilitative L2 learning communities plays a crucial role in the transformational process (see Kim, 2009b for a detailed discussion).
Figure 1. Relationships between Dörnyei’s L2 motivational self-system and SCT-based L2 motivation theory.

Although Figure 1 may prove to be a useful diagram in understanding complicated notions such as L2 selves and L2 motives/motivation, the exact nature of the L2 community and goal setting has remained mostly unexplored. Without explicating the conditions of the L2 self transformation, Figure 1 may be misunderstood as a crude generalization. Therefore, expanding Kim’s (2009b) conceptual framework, in this paper, the researcher focuses on two Korean ESL students’ transformational process from an ought-to L2 self to an ideal L2 self and under what conditions and contexts such transformations are enabled. Sensitization (Kim, 2006), or L2 learners’ creative recognition of their lack of L2 proficiency in SA contexts, is elaborated in the subsequent sections. To this end, the two research questions are as follows:


2. How can sensitization in L2 learning motivation be explained in terms of the L2 motivational self-system and SCT-based L2 motivation theory?

### 3. Methods

#### 3.1. Participants

Hana and Chang (pseudonyms) were on a short-term visa to learn ESL and lived in Toronto for approximately seven and 12 months, respectively. They were selected for this research because both were fourth year undergraduate students expecting to graduate upon returning to Korea. Hana, a 23 year-old female student majoring in English education, wanted to become an English teacher at a public secondary school in Korea. When the interviews first began in 2005, Chang, a 25 year-old male student majoring in electronic engineering, was undecided in terms of whether he would return to Korea or stay in Canada.

**Hana:** Hana started her ESL learning in Toronto by taking a general ESL course, but she soon realized that she needed not only conversational skills but also appropriate knowledge of vocabulary and grammar. This recognition made her change her class to a TOEFL preparation course in the second month, which was when the first interview took place. From her fourth month (third interview), she started to take the TESOL Certificate program at the same ESL school, which she completed in the sixth month. She stayed in a shared apartment with four female students of different nationalities. She remained in the same apartment until the last month of her stay. Compared with other ESL participants, she stayed in Toronto for a relatively shorter period (seven months). Excerpt 1 is Hana’s language learning autobiography, which was collected before the first monthly interview.

*Excerpt 1: Hana’s Autobiography*

… My classes at the university were not very interesting, and there were too many students in the classroom. As such, I could hardly find the chance to participate in the
class activities. Also, when I traveled foreign countries, whenever I was asked about my undergrad major, I would often be hesitant to reveal that I am majoring in English education because my English proficiency was so low. So I decided to come to Canada to spend more time studying English for the purpose of the National Teacher’s Exam preparation.

Chang: From the first interview, Chang had ambivalent motivation for L2 learning: job-related and living-abroad motivation. The clearest difference between Chang and the other study participants was that he had more than 20 relatives living in the Greater Toronto Area. He started his ESL program by taking general ESL courses in a small-sized private ESL school seven months after his arrival and switched to one of Toronto’s largest ESL schools, Southern Toronto College (STC) (pseudonym), which offered a wide variety of ESL programs. At STC, he took a College Preparation Program (CPP), and the completion of the course allowed him to enroll in a vocational college. Even though he did not make any close friends in the six months he had been living in Toronto, at STC, he became acquainted with many Chinese ESL students who also took the same course. Excerpt 2 is Chang’s language learning autobiography, which describes his experience with the exam-oriented English learning in Korea.

Excerpt 2: Chang’s Autobiography

I kept studying English mainly for the university-entrance purpose. Even now, I am continuing English learning for a certain purpose, but I think the main motivation for learning English is purely exam-oriented. I studied English for midterm and final exams in my middle school days and for university entrance in my high school. And I am now studying English for a better TOEIC score in anticipation of the upcoming graduation.

3.2. Data Collection and Analysis

With regard to the data, monthly semi-structured interviews, two-page English learning autobiographies, and the researcher’s classroom/tutoring observations were used. The monthly semi-structured interviews were conducted on a regular basis, and the other data (i.e., autobiographies and class/tutoring observations) were used for the purpose of data triangulation. After a series of piloting efforts, semi-structured interview questions were refined and implemented (see Appendix for sample questions). Each interview was approximately an hour and a half, and the interviews were conducted once a month for each participant over a period of seven months for Hana and 11 months for Chang. The interview questions were based on Vygotsky’s (1978) sociocultural theory, Ushioda’s (2001) qualitative L2 motivation research, and Wenger’s (1998) concept of communities of practice. For the consistency of data collection and analyses, the same set of questions was asked each and every time, and the same sequence of interview questions was always maintained. The recorded interview data were transcribed verbatim immediately after each session, and the transcript was returned to the participants for member checking purposes. The interviews were conducted in Korean, the mother tongue of the participants and the researcher, and the data presented in this paper have been translated into English.

For the purpose of facilitating the data coding process, NVivo 1.3, qualitative data analysis software, was used, and the coding procedure was guided by Glaser and Strauss’s (1967) and Strauss and Corbin’s (1998) grounded theory approach, which is useful for theory generation if the field of investigation is relatively new. Because the use of the interview method was still a rarity in the field of L2 motivation research (Ushioda, 2001), it was deemed legitimate to use the grounded theory approach. As such, the initial stage was open coding. The coding strips were
thematically categorized, and their hierarchical relationships were investigated in the process of axial coding. This paper reports the participants' ideal L2 self and sensitization results; thus, among the axial coding strips, only the relevant strips are eclectically reported (i.e., selective coding). In order to prevent any potentially unacknowledged personal bias in the coding process, another person majoring in applied linguistics was hired; the individual coded approximately a fifth of the entire transcripts independently. The inter-coder percentage of the agreement between the researcher and the second coder was .83, which confirmed relatively high reliability (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

4. Findings

Similar to L2 motivation research conducted in East Asia (e.g., Gao, Zhao, Cheng, & Zhou, 2004, 2007; Zhang, 2010), most quantitative studies in Korea (Lee, 1996; Kang, 2000; I.-O. Kim, 2009) have shown that Korean students exhibit instrumental motivation, which reflects practical needs to learn English for utilitarian purposes such as initial job screening and placement. The same set of instrumentality was also identified in both participants' data. In the monthly interviews, the question "why are you interested in learning English?" was asked to identify the nature of the participants' L2 learning motivation. Excerpt 3 shows Chang's and Hana's answers in response to this question:

Excerpt 3 (first month interviews)

1.74 Chang (C): Well, if I'm in Korea with good English skills, I will have a better job opportunity. But basically, I would like to live here. I mean, I would like to live in a foreign country.

1.2 Hana (H): I need it for the National Teacher's Exam preparation. Also, even after I become an English teacher, I will need to speak excellent English for my job. So, English is very much related to my future career. Also, because I like to travel, English will be a useful tool for heart-to-heart talks.

At a superficial level, both participants commented on instrumental L2 learning motivation. However, Chang was not specific about his future career, whereas Hana elaborated on her aspiring career path as an English teacher. Also, Chang's comments were two-folded in that his job-related motivation seemed to be in conflict with his desire to live abroad. In other words, he wanted to learn English either to be hired in Korea or to live in a foreign country. Hana, on the other hand, did not express such ambivalence; she prioritized her urgent need to learn English for her English teaching job and backed up the need by introducing a secondary reason, to travel.

The two participants' autobiographies in Excerpts 1 and 2 present an interesting contrast with the interview data in Excerpt 3. Hana's desire to learn English for both her career opportunity and foreign travel is shown in Excerpts 1 and 3, but Chang's desire to immigrate to a foreign country is found only in Excerpt 3. This means that Hana internalized her need to learn English and was aware of the importance of it, which was articulated in her autobiography and her interview data. However, in Chang's case, only his exam-orientation was identified in both datasets, which indicates that his desire to live abroad was not internalized to the same degree as the exam-orientation.

One of the reviewers pointed out that in Excerpt 3, given the expression "but basically," Chang seems to be more emphasizing integrative or immigration orientation in L2 learning motivation.
4.1. Instrumentality and L2 Selves

As Dörnyei (2009) stated, the degree of internalizing the necessity of learning English decides whether the learner’s motivational self echoes an ideal L2 self or an ought-to L2 self. As shown in Excerpt 3, Hana’s response reflected her imminent necessity for teaching preparation, and her desire for foreign travel was an addendum. However, Chang’s comments were only minimally related to specific future career plans, and his first utterance and the second were not closely interlinked. Therefore, even though Excerpt 3 may show the two participants’ instrumentality at the surface level, from the perspective of Dörnyei’s L2 motivational self-system, we can speculate that Chang’s and Hana’s L2 motivational selves may reveal different characteristics.

In analyzing interview data, Kim (2009a) implied that a lack of internalization is often expressed in the participant’s inconsistent job prospects. If an L2 learner does not fully internalize the necessity of learning English or the meaning of spending time and financial resources in the target language community, the learner cannot specify a concrete future job and ends up stating only a vague idea of learning English. In this sense, it would be illuminating to contrast Hana’s and Chang’s future job plans in Excerpts 4 and 5. Compared with Hana’s comments in Excerpt 4, which shows her firm resolution to be a good English teacher in Korea, Chang’s comments in Excerpt 5 do not evince a detailed future plan, except for his desire to be an immigrant.

Excerpt 4

2.84 H: I want to be a good English teacher who is willing to help students learn English well. [second interview]
4.119 H: Eventually, I would like to become an English teacher. [fourth interview]
6.84 H: Once I go back to Korea, I would like to teach English. Although I may not succeed in passing the National Teacher Exam, I will re-take the exam in next

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4.2. Sensitization and Its Role in L2 Selves

As stated above, Hana and Chang expressed instrumental motivation, although Chang’s instrumentality was geared toward the ought-to L2 self, whereas Hana’s reflected her ideal L2 self. Hana’s detailed elaboration on her L2 learning goal (i.e., becoming an English teacher) reflected her internalized necessity of L2 learning. Chang’s incoherent learning goals only showed that he repeated his externally-oriented needs (mainly coming from his relatives in Toronto). Given this, it is possible to assume that Hana might have been more susceptible to her educational context because she was cognizant of her imminent need to learn English to fulfill her life dream and because she wanted to take a full advantage of the contextual benefit. Excerpt 6 illustrates Hana’s L2 learning experience.

Excerpt 6 (third month interview)
3.89 Interviewer (I): What is your purpose of taking ESL classes?
3.90 H: What was my purpose? Umm... Because I could spend this month safe and well? (laugh) I thought I should study English harder because I started taking TESOL certificate course this month. Actually, one of my Korean classmates speaks English really well. I did not see her last month. She is even younger than I am. So, I was a bit nervous and motivated, and I will study English more this month.

In her third month, Hana changed her ESL program from TOEFL preparation, which she had been taking for two months, to a TESOL certificate program. According to Hana, the English proficiency of students in TESOL certificate classes was superior to those taking general ESL courses or specific part-time courses. As stated in Excerpt 6, the presence of a new Korean student made Hana compare her English proficiency with that of the new student. Her perception of her inferior English in comparison to the other student motivated her to make additional efforts to learn and use English in her classes.

Note that Hana’s recognition of her insufficiency in English proficiency derived from her participation in an L2 community while being keenly aware of her future goals. Without Hana’s participation in the TESOL certificate program, this context-embedded recognition might not have risen within her; the mere presence at the program without a specific L2 learning goal could not have made her realize the linguistic gap. Also, the gap between Hana’s English proficiency and that of her classmate was perceived reducible by making cognitive efforts (i.e., studying English harder). If the new student had been from another country or a native English speaker, Hana might not have been motivated to emulate the student. In other words, the new Korean student acted as an attainable role model for Hana.

By contrast, Chang did not report such recognition even in similar situations. Like Hana, he attended ESL classes, but he did not experience an intense moment of such a realization. Excerpt 7 presents the minimal role of Chang’s ESL classmates.

Excerpt 7 (second interview)
2.368 I: Do you have any personal relationship or friendship with your ESL classmates?
2.369 C: Sometimes, I go to the library with them, but I rarely hang out with them.
2.370 I: Why is that? Is it because you don’t want to be with them?
2.371 C: I myself don’t like to... I just follow their opinion. If they say ‘let’s hit the movies,’ I just go out with them.

Compared with Hana’s active utilization of the contextual benefit of learning the L2 of the target language community, Chang did not express the desire to communicate with other ESL students and avoided participating in L2 peer groups. For
this difference, the mismatch of L2 learning goals between Chang and Hana needs to be emphasized. Chang's L2 learning goal was to immigrate to Canada, whereas Hana's was to become an English teacher. Most ESL students in SA experience (including Hana) do not usually set immigration goals; after several months of ESL learning, most return to their home countries (cf. Kim & Yang, 2010). Therefore, Chang’s L2 learning motivation to immigrate to the target language community is discordant with the average ESL student. Moreover, Chang’s Korean network hindered his active participation in the L2 community. As stated previously, he had a multitude of relatives who could always provide financial and emotional assistance. Obviously, Chang might have regarded his established network as a valuable asset in terms of settling into the new environment. At the same time, despite the benefits in terms of savings (e.g., reduced living expenses), he was deprived of an opportunity to practice English on a daily basis, and as a consequence, his L2 learning seemed to suffer. In this sense, Chang’s well-established Korean network in an unfamiliar surrounding served two functions: a safety net for his emotional and physical well-being and an initial barrier to English learning. Chang’s adverse L2 learning situation (when he lived in his aunt’s house in north Toronto) is described in Excerpt 8.

Excerpt 8 (third interview)
3.63 I: Do you have many opportunities to speak English with your aunt’s children?
3.74 C: Just a little when I come back [aunt’s] home and a bit in the morning right after I wake up. So, in fact, there’s little chance. I think I use English mostly in my ESL school.

Because Chang’s Korean network hindered his interaction with respect to the L2, his L2 participation was limited to the boundary of ESL school. However, as shown in Excerpt 7, Chang did not actively communicate with other ESL students, which might have been a reflection of his differing L2 learning goal. As such, much of Chang’s L2 communication was through his ESL instructors, and when asked about the most influential person in his ESL learning, he named his ESL instructors.

Excerpt 9 (second interview)
2.130 C: My ESL instructors are almost the only persons I can speak in English with. When I can't make myself understood, I feel uneasy.
2.131 I: Can you think of any example of such an experience?
2.132 C: Nothing in particular. I can't remember any special occasion.

Given Chang’s limited participation in L2 activities, the chance to recognize the L2 gap in his daily life might have been slim. His L2 input-impoverished contexts could not trigger this recognition in Chang. In Hana’s data in Excerpt 6, she was motivated by finding a Korean ESL student who spoke better English and wanted to reach a higher level of English proficiency. Regarding L2 proficiency, experienced native English speaking instructors in Excerpt 9 were superior to the Korean student. However, the L2 gap between Chang’s L2 proficiency and that of native English instructors is unlikely to be narrowed in near future. Although Chang experienced communication difficulties, he could not recall a specific episode with his ESL instructors (e.g., Line 2.132 in Excerpt 9), which indicates that native ESL instructors do not function as the point of reference, such as the Korean student reported by Hana Excerpt 6.

4.3. Chang’s Transformation from an Ought-to L2 Self to an Ideal L2 Self

In Chang’s case, despite his ought-to L2 self presented in previous sections, which were the result of the disparity between
his L2 input-impoverished contexts and L2 learning goals, an ideal L2 self had gradually emerged. In his sixth month, Chang made up his mind not to go back to Korea and to immigrate to Canada. For five months, he made frequent phone calls to his college friends in Korea and asked about job prospects in his undergraduate major (electronic engineering). Chang’s friends were pessimistic, and this affected Chang’s decision. Moreover, his mother’s persuasion to immigrate consolidated Chang’s decision. He wanted to build a Canadian career before applying for an immigration visa because he thought that way the best and the surest way to ensure a white-collar job (most immigrants assumed manual labor jobs). Chang thought that the logical process was to enroll in a Canadian college and to acquire a specific skill readily applicable to the Canadian market.

From his seventh month, he started to take a College Preparation Program (CPP) course at STC. Chang’s decision to immigrate to Canada is clearly stated in Excerpt 10. Compared to Excerpt 5, where Chang expressed uncertainty by saying “I’m not sure yet” or “I don’t know yet,” Excerpt 10 does not reveal such linguistic hedging devices.

Excerpt 10 (seventh month)
7.131. I: Why are you interested in learning English?
7.132. C: I need it to live here.
7.133. I: Do you mean to live as an immigrant?
7.134. C: Yes. In order to immigrate here. Also, I need English for my future career.

The CPP class that Chang took at the school was a full-time course, which provided him an opportunity to know other classmates more intimately. Chang had the same classmates for seven hours a day for two months. As a result, he made several friends who shared the same goal of attending a Canadian college. From the second month of attending CPP, he gradually developed a courteous relationship with Chinese immigrants and a middle-aged Korean female ESL student in the program. According to Chang, the Korean lady volunteered to take the role as the CPP class leader. Whenever she found negligent students who spoke in their mother tongue, she would admonish them outright. Chang’s close relationship with her positively affected his daily English practice.

Excerpt 11 (seventh month)
7.86. C: In my ESL school [i.e., CPP program], almost all day long, I mean, from nine to four, I would use English. I would talk with the Korean lady. A middle-aged lady. (laugh)
7.87. I: In English?
7.88. C: Of course. She speaks English quite well and expresses all that she wants to say all the time. I want to speak English like she does.

In Excerpts 10 and 11, we can find an alignment of Chang’s learning goal (i.e., graduating CPP and entering a college to immigrate to Canada) and the optimal L2 learning context (CPP, where he built a beneficial peer relationship). The participation in ESL classes, where most members of the learning community shared the same goal of attending a Canadian college, made Chang sensitive to his L2 environment (Excerpt 12), which contrasted his passive attitude toward other ESL students in his second month (Excerpt 7).

Excerpt 12 (eighth month)
8.430. C: When I see other ESL students who study very hard, I think “Oh, here again! What a diligent guy!” And they make me motivated. But when I see others who are just goofing around and having fun, I think to myself, “Well, why did they come here?”

Chang’s second month data show that he did not think that
there existed much resemblance between him and them because he regarded himself as a potential immigrant and other ESL students as non-immigrants. However, as shown in Turn 8.430 in Excerpt 12, he focused his attention to his CPP colleagues. He shared the same goal (to be admitted to a college) with his colleagues, which activated his sensitivity in L2 learning contexts.

To summarize, as indicated by seventh month data, Chang showed an alignment of his learner goal and participation in L2 communities, and from this alignment, his ought-to L2 self was transformed into an ideal L2 self. This means that Chang internalized the need to learn English to immigrate to Canada, to which he did not place much personal meaning initially because this was mandated by his relatives. His decision to immigrate resulted in the establishment of a concrete goal (entering a vocational college) and a sub-goal (attending CPP). The participation in the CPP course enabled Chang to meet other students with similar goals. The CPP institutional context facilitated the formation of Chang’s social group, which was conducive to L2 learning. An important implication from Chang’s seventh interview data is that the quality or depth of interaction arising from the alignment of learning goals and participation in an L2 community is more crucial in the creation of an ideal L2 self than the length of simple presence in L2 communities or the opportunity to meet native L2 speakers in SA experience.

5. Discussion

L2 learning is time-consuming and requires extraordinary efforts to reach a certain level of communicative competence. In this regard, many L2 learners believe that SA experience would significantly expedite the process of L2 learning because an extended period of exposure to authentic L2 input would be inevitable (Wilkinson, 2002). However, except a few cases (e.g., Llanes & Muñoz, 2009), research in SA experience has shown that mere exposure to the target language community does not guarantee the student’s success in L2 acquisition (e.g., Kinginger, 2008; Mendelson, 2004). Mendelson (2004), for example, stated that most SA students do not take a full advantage of SA experience and do not formulate communities of practice with native L2 speakers. Similarly, Miller and Ginsberg (1995) reported that even in the rare case of conversing with native L2 speakers in the community, SA students have the tendency to expect native L2 speakers’ active role in verbal interactions, imposing a mental burden to native speaking interlocutors.

Findings from Hana and Chang indicate that having an extended stay in the SA environment alone does not have the same beneficial impact on L2 learners. Instead, creating optimal L2 learning contexts by learners is the key to the enhancement in their motivation and the maintenance of the created ideal L2 selves, through which the learners would be able to visualize their L2-enabled prosperous future (Dörnyei, 2009). As shown in Chang’s data, competent L2 speaking instructors may be effective in classroom L2 instructions, but the role exerts a limited impact. Hana’s more competent peer in the TESOL preparation course or Chang’s close friendship with Chinese and Korean ESL students were motivating factors. These factors strengthened their ideal L2 selves and transformed their ought-to L2 selves into ideal L2 selves.

However, this does not mean that the social surrounding per se affected their L2 selves or that it positively enhanced their L2 learning motivation. Rather, the alignment of L2 learners’ goals and appropriate SA experience was the key to the creation of ideal L2 selves in the participants. In Hana’s case, her specific goal of becoming a competent English teacher was constantly...
re-affirmed by her TESOL preparation course. For Chang, although he did not specify a specific L2 learning goal in the beginning, from the seventh month, his goal of immigrating to Canada was refined into a group of sub-goals such as attending the CPP program and getting into a Canadian college. The goal setting process was in harmony with his CPP classmates, most of whom shared the same L2 learning goal.

When such an alignment occurs, learners become sensitive to the contextual cues and can benefit from the contextual factors. Before the alignment, the beneficial contexts do not stimulate L2 learners’ desire to learn the L2, but with the alignment, L2 learners will notice the gap between their current L2 proficiency and their desired L2 proficiency. Referring to the moment of realizing the linguistic gap as sensitization, Kim (2006, p. 65) defined sensitization as “the moment when an L2 learners recognizes the gap between his or her current L2 proficiency and the desirable L2 proficiency to be attained.” He stated that sensitization occurs when

1) the L2 learner is aware of his or her participation in an L2-involved activity, 2) the learner’s learning goal and learning belief are related to the experience of participation, and 3) the L2 learner perceives the gap as being able to be resolved by a conscious action of L2 learning. (Kim, 2006, p. 65)

The above condition applied to both participants’ data. When the participants were attending ESL schools (i.e., TESOL and CPP programs), they actively participated in L2 learning activities. In addition, their L2 learning goals, although qualitatively different (i.e., becoming an English teacher and attending a technical college), were in line with ESL participation experience. Finally, their peer group provided a point of reference for their linguistic gap: the Korean ESL student for Hana and the Chinese ESL students and the Korean lady for Chang provided Hana and Chang the attainable goals, which induced their conscious efforts to learn English.

From a Vygotskian sociocultural theory perspective, the creation or maintenance of an ideal L2 self is the result of mediation between learners’ agency and environment. Vygotsky (1978) proposed that learners or humans in general do not bear a direct one-on-one relation with their environment. Instead, the relationship is mediated by learners’ agency, which is “shaped by our historical and cultural trajectories” (van Lier, 2008, p. 164) and “entails the ability to assign relevance and significance to things and events” (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006, p. 143). Only the environment perceived as important has the potential to affect the learner’s L2 learning.

Refining the differential influence of the environment on each L2 learner, van Lier (2000) developed the concept of affordances first proposed by Gibson (1979). In the multiple webs of social interactions including L2 learning, all external stimuli do not necessarily have the same importance to every human being. Only some stimuli are noticed and perceived as important to an individual, whereas others may not be perceived or entirely ignored. The personally important environmental factors become affordances, whereas others remain as indifferent factors. In this regard, van Lier (2000, p. 252) stated that “an affordance is a property of neither the actor nor of an object: it is a relationship between the two.”

Kim (2009a, 2009b) argued that an ought-to L2 self is externally rooted and is not deeply integrated to the learner’s personal desire to learn the L2. However, the interplay between the ought-to L2 self and the ideal L2 self is dynamically evolving, reflecting the learner’s agentic goal setting and his or her L2 learning contexts. Sensitization captures the moment of alignment between the learner’s specific goal and learning contexts. It is the moment when the objective, indifferent
environment is transformed into and perceived as a meaningful affordance.

From Gardner's (1985, 2009) traditional perspective in L2 learning motivation, both participants expressed instrumentality related to the practical value of learning the L2. However, the interview methods, along with other triangulating data, demonstrated that the two participants' L2 selves presented drastic differences, which could not be placed into the same category of instrumentality. For Hana, the ideal L2 self was steadily consolidated, whereas Chang's L2 self changed from an ought-to L2 self to an ideal L2 self, resulting from his goal formulation and the creation of affordances for L2 learning.

Figure 2. Revised interactive paradigm between the L2 motivational self-system and SCT-based L2 motivation theory.

Based on the findings, the relationship between the ought-to L2 self and the ideal L2 self can be schematized as Figure 2 above. Figure 2 illustrates the difference between the environment and the affordance in the active interplay between the two L2 selves. When an L2 learner recognizes an L2-related linguistic gap, sensitization occurs. Before the sensitization, an ought-to L2 self originating from social pressure or necessity prevails, and the role of the ostensibly beneficial L2 learning context is minimal, remaining in an inactive environment. However, after the sensitization, an ideal L2 self is created or

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maintained, and pre-existing, but unnoticed, environments function as personally meaningful affordances. Because not all environments can be perceived as affordances, environmental factors still remain in the façade of affordances.

Figure 2 above highlights the interactive nature of L2 selves and motives/motivation. As argued elsewhere (Allen & Kim, 2010), L2 learners' motives or vague ideas of the reason for L2 learning have often been examined by the means of questionnaire methods. However, in order to gain the momentum of behavioral changes such as making further efforts to learn English or having extended conversations with other L2 speakers, we need to tap into the evidence for motivation, which results from the integration of learners' initial motives, their specific L2 learning goals, and the L2 learning-conducive context. Sensitization captures the moment of such integration, and at that moment, the L2 environment is transformed into idiosyncratically meaningful L2 affordances (van Lier, 2000).

6. Summary and Limitations

As Llanes and Muños (2009) and Kinginger (2008) stated, prior study abroad (SA) research has usually adopted the survey or interview method after the participants returned to their home countries; however, these methods are not sufficiently sensitive in the investigation of the participants' dynamically changing motivational aspects. In this regard, this study's use of monthly interviews with L2 learners in the target language community contributes to the existing knowledge of SA experience-based L2 learning motivation.

With regard to the research questions, first, Dörnyei's (2005, 2009) L2 motivational self-system is a useful framework in terms
of explaining the difference in L2 learners’ motivational behavior and perception. An ought-to L2 self can be transformed into an ideal L2 self if the learner has a specific goal and the learning contexts are perceived affordances beneficial to the learner. In addition, from the perspective of SCT-based L2 motivation (Kim, 2007, 2009a, 2009b), when the learner’s motive is integrated with goal specificity and facilitative contexts, the motive can be transformed into motivation, which has the power to enhance the level of L2 learning activities. Second, the sensitization, or the learner’s subjective perception of a linguistic gap, captures the moment of the transformation from an ought-to L2 self to an ideal L2 self. In such a case, the environment is meaningfully perceived as an affordance.

The participants’ L2 selves were not created in a vacuum. As Chang’s data illustrate, the L2 self reflects the L2 learner’s previous history, but depending on the mediation between the previous history and the current L2 learning experience, the L2 self can always change. The L2 learning goal and the learner’s perception of the L2 learning community affect the transformation from an ought-to L2 self to an ideal L2 self or vice versa. Sensitization presents an optimal situation when an L2 learner’s goal and L2 learning life experience are interlinked. Therefore, sensitization is the instantiation of ideal L2 self or, following Kim’s (2006, 2009b) argument, is the microgenetic moment of the L2 learning motivation.

Despite the uniqueness of the current study, there are at least three limitations. First, the participants were cognitively mature, adult Korean ESL learners, and the progression of L2 selves and the sensitization analyzed in the paper may not be applicable to other population groups (e.g., different age or ethnic groups). Second, as indicated throughout the paper, the nature of L2 selves always reflects the learner’s social contexts, and thus, the findings may not be applicable to other socioeducational contexts such as FFL (not ESL) learning. Finally, the relationship between the L2 self and English proficiency was not investigated. Llanes and Muños (2009) found that SA experience in itself may exert a beneficial impact on L2 learners irrespective of the duration, age, and level of L2 proficiency. By the same token, we can hypothesize that regardless of the nature of the L2 self (i.e., whether the learner creates an ideal L2 self or an ought-to L2 self), his or her English proficiency development may not be closely related to the L2 self or even to motivation. In this regard, future research is warranted to explore this hypothesis.

References


Kim, I.-O. 2009. An analysis of primary school students' English learning motivation based on their grade levels and regions. English Language Teaching 21, 259-282.


Appendix: Sample Interview Questions

ESL Motivation
- Why are you interested in learning English?
- To what degree are you committed to learn English? Please give examples.
- What is your goal for learning English?

Life History
(During the past one month)
- What is your most pleasant memory as a language learner? Please describe.
- What is your most unpleasant memory as a language learner? Please describe.

Relationships, Social Status and Identity
- What kind of relationships do you have with your family (or landlord/lady or roommates) in Toronto?
- How do they help you to learn English?
- Do you have a specific identity or voice when you learn or use English?
- Does it reflect who you are? (your personal or ethnic identity)

ESL Learning Expectations
- What is your expected English proficiency level?
- Among the four areas (i.e., listening, speaking, reading, and writing) in English, what is the most needed and important area for you?